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ZNR UUUUU ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY TBILISI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1580
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 000925

SENSITIVE

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H FOR CODEL DAVIS, DEPT FOR EUR/CARC

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: CODEL DAVIS DISCUSSES BILATERAL TIES WITH
PRESIDENT, DEFENSE MINISTER, AND PARLIAMENTARIANS

¶1. (SBU) Summary: During a May 8-9 visit to Tbilisi, CODEL Davis met with President Saakashvili, Minister of Defense Vasil Sikharulidze, women leaders in the GOG and Parliament, and the Speaker of the Parliament (reported septel). Sikharulidze covered Georgia's ongoing defense reforms and the recent attempted mutiny at an army tank base. During dinner, the CODEL discussed healthcare issues and women's leadership in the GOG. Saaakashvili focused on the Russian challenges facing Georgia and the region, as well as his plans to respond to ongoing opposition protests by strengthening institutions over personalities. End summary.

MINISTER OF DEFENSE

¶2. (SBU) During meetings with CODEL Davis, Minister of Defense Sikharulidze and Deputy Minister Giorgi Muchaidze discussed the current security and humanitarian situation in Georgia and the occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the recent mutiny at Mukhrovani military base, bilateral defense cooperation, and the implementation of reforms in the defense sphere.

¶3. (SBU) The Minister stated that the Russians continue to violate the 6-point agreement and undermine the Geneva process. He described the status of ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia and South Ossetia as "deplorable." The Minister said the May 5 mutiny at Mukhrovani Military Base was a serious, but isolated incident. The Ambassador praised the Government of Georgia for not casting wild accusations of involvement at the Russians, but rather taking the time to properly investigate the incident before assigning blame.

¶4. (SBU) The CODEL thanked the Minister for volunteering troops for Afghanistan, where the Georgians will be supporting a French contingent. The Minister noted that the Turks had also recently approached him requesting troops to support one of their contingents. The Minister ended the meeting with a discussion of the implementation of reforms in the defense sphere. He said training and education are his top reform priorities and key for the future of the armed forces. The Minister is also seeking to improve personnel and financial management systems. Improving the housing situation of soldiers and their families was also raised.

WOMEN LEADERS IN GOVERNMENT

¶5. (SBU) The CODEL hosted dinner for female representatives from Georgian ministries and Parliament. Those attending included Rusudan Kervalishvili, Deputy Chairperson of Parliament; Khatuna Gogorishvili, Chairperson on Procedural Issues and Rules Committee; Magdalina Anikashvili, Deputy Chair Healthcare and Social Issues Committee; Chiora Taktakishvili, Deputy Chair Legal Issues Committee; Tina Burjaliani, First Deputy Minister of Justice; and Helen Khoshtaria, Deputy State Minister for Euro-Atlantic Integration. The discussion focused on Georgia's new healthcare initiatives to make care affordable for all members of society, women's education and wellness, and how to increase the number of women in various key-decision making roles in government.

Kervalishvili expressed her deep appreciation for continued U.S. assistance and support in the face of on-going challenges.

PRESIDENT HOSTS EARLY MORNING EVENT

¶6. (SBU) President Saakashvili hosted an early breakfast May 9 after arriving from Prague where he had participated in the EU's Eastern Partnership Summit. Chief of Staff Natalia Kancheli and National Security Advisor Eka Tkeshelashvili attended. Saakashvili said he had never seen the Europeans so understanding of the Russian threat -- not just to Georgia's existence, but to the broader region. He Q-- not just to Georgia's existence, but to the broader region. He said Russia is pushing to monopolize Central Asian energy and reassert control over the Caucasus. While Russian occupation of Georgian territory is bad enough, he said their control of two-thirds of Georgia's coastline is especially serious. Saakashvili noted Russia's internal problems, and thought that these problems might make it difficult over the long term for Russia to maintain its control over Georgia's separatist regions. However, he added that 80 percent of the ethnic Georgians from these regions have been forced from their homes.

¶7. (SBU) On a positive note, the President proudly noted his fight against corruption - one that has largely rooted out corruption in state institutions. He said people now trust these institutions more than any individual politician, including himself. He believes that by allowing the opposition protests in Tbilisi to continue, people will respect governmental bodies even more and move the country away from a cult of personality. He believes that the non-parliamentary opposition is losing support and hopes that some of the less radical leaders will engage in a constructive dialogue on reform.

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¶8. (SBU) Saakashvili and the CODEL discussed strengthening and implementing the U.S.-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership. He welcomed Senator Kerry's and Representative Dreier's resolution calling for a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Georgia. He said an FTA with Europe is also key to restoring Georgia's economic growth.

¶9. (SBU) The group talked about regional challenges, including Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Turkey. Representative Davis thanked the President for his offer to contribute Georgian troops to ISAF. Saakashvili offered the CODEL the use of any Georgian infrastructure to support ISAF. He then ended the conversation on its beginning note, noting again that Russia remains a key challenge to not just Georgia's autonomy, but that of Central Asia and Europe as well.

TEFFT